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ABSTRACT

From a review of the Scientific Advisory Committee's report and the five volumes of research on television and social behavior, there is an overwhelming consensus that televised violence does have an adverse effect on certain members of our society, and that the broadcasters should be put on notice. While the method of selection and the final composition of the Scientific Advisory Committee might have favored the networks, it is significant that a unanimous report was filed. It is important to emphasize at this point that "no action" in this social area is a form of action: it is an acquiesence in the continuation of the present level of televised violence entering American homes. The Department of Health, Education, and Welfare stands ready to assist those concerned with television programming by providing scientific information and advice, and the Federal Communications Commission, members of the academic community, other legislators, and members of the broadcasting industry will have suggestions for reducing televised violence and including more programming designed to induce prosocial behavior. The Committee's report, then, represents a step forward and should provide a stimulus to other social scientists to build on the solid foundation which has now been erected. (The author is the U.S. Surgeon General.) (SH)

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Statement of
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Before
Subcommittee on Communications
of the
Senate Commerce Committee
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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

It is a pleasure to appear before you this morning to discuss the Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee Report on Television and Social Behavior and its implications for the American people and the American television broadcasting industry. Because there has been some public misunderstanding of the report, I hope to be able to clarify the record on what the report actually says and how the Advisory Committee arrived at its conclusions.

Let me begin, Mr. Chairman, by answering your request made when I appeared before your Committee September 28, 1971. You said, "I would hope that the Surgeon General in due time will come before this Committee, not with a lot of if's and but's but will tell us in simple language whether or not the broadcasters ought to be put on notice and be very, very careful in this area because it might have an effect on certain people."

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After review of the Committee's report and the five volumes of original research undertaken at your request, as well as a review of the previous literature on the subject, my professional response today is that the broadcasters should be put on notice. The overwhelming consensus and the unanimous Scientific Advisory Committee's report indicates that televised violence, indeed, does have an adverse effect on certain members of our society.

While the Committee report is carefully phrased and qualified in language acceptable to social scientists, it is clear to me that the causal relationship between televised violence and anti-social behavior is sufficient to warrant appropriate and immediate remedial action. The data on social phenomena such as television and violence and/or aggressive behavior will never be clear enough for all social scientists to agree on the formulation of a succinct statement of causality. But there comes a time when the data are sufficient to justify action. That time has come.

I would also emphasize that no action in this social area is a form of action: it is an acquiesence in the continuation of the present level of televised violence entering American homes.

In stating this causal relationship it is important to keep in mind that anti-social behavior existed in our society long before television appeared. We must be careful not to make television programming the whipping boy for all of society's ills. Yet we must take whatever actions we can, when we do identify factors contributing to anti-social behavior in our society.

While the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare has no regulatory responsibility in the field of communications, it does, however, have a responsibility for both the mental health and the education of our citizens. The Department stands ready to assist those Federal and other governmental or voluntary agencies concerned with television programming by providing scientific information and advice as appropriate. I am certain that members of the Federal Communications Commission, members of the academic community, other legislators, and members of the broadcasting industry will have suggestions both as to how to achieve a reduction of televised violence in programming, as well as suggestions for television content designed to induce pro-social behavior.

Mr. Chairman, let me turn now to the report and its conclusions and the composition of the Advisory Committee.

The Committee selection and operation was modeled after the Surgeon General's Advisory Committee on Smoking and Health set up some ten years ago. At that time, because it was possible that the report on smoking might be unfavorable to the tobacco industry, that industry was given an opportunity to indicate which scientists (from a list of experts in the field) were considered to have already made up their minds that smoking was injurious to health. At the same time, scientists who felt that smoking was proven not to be harmful to health were similarly not chosen for service on the smoking and health scientific advisory committee. In the instance of the Television and Violence Advisory Committee, Surgeon General Stewart, approximately three years ago, submitted a list of names of 40 distinguished social scientists to the three networks and to the National Association of Broadcasters, inquiring whether the industry felt that any of the scientists had already determined that there was a link between televised violence and subsequent anti-social behavior. In response, two of the networks and the National Association of Broadcasters listed seven individuals. None of the seven was chosen for service on the Surgeon General's committee. Unfortunately, the American Psychological Association, Psychiatric Association, and other academic groups were not polled similarly and asked

whether or not certain scientists felt that televised violence had no effect or a pro-social effect on the viewers. But in any event, in the final choice of the 12 scientists for the Committee there were two industry representatives, one former television industry employee, and two consultants to one of the networks. Industry members were chosen since Surgeon General Stewart felt network cooperation in production of pilot films would be very useful to the Committee and its researchers. The Committee itself commented on this selection procedure and I agree with their comments. A Committee such as this, like Caesar's wife, should be above suspicion but it is extremely important to point out that this Scientific Advisory Committee, despite the complexity in the social science area, has filed a unanimous report. It is significant to me that scientists from different backgrounds such as psychology, sociology, political science, anthropology, psychiatry, and child development have filed a unanimous report. If one were to bring together another group of distinguished scientists of as diverse a background as this Committee, I doubt that they would have filed a significantly different report--if it were to be a unanimous report. Any one of the

scientists might have written a somewhat stronger or a somewhat weaker report depending upon his view of the evidence. The strength here lies both in the unanimity of the report, and in the knowledge that these social scientists are careful scientists and are unwilling to go beyond what the hard scientific data permit.

The Scientific Advisory Committee itself did not conduct research. The research was conducted by independent scientists, whose programs had a scientific review similar to that of other National Institute of Mental Health contractors. The scientists' work published in the five volumes was not edited or screened by the Scientific Advisory Committee prior to publication. The Scientific Advisory Committee did review and did discuss both the original work reported in these five volumes and all other pertinent previously published research and data in this field prior to writing their unanimous report to me.

Mr. Chairman, I believe the most constructive thing that we can do after accepting the findings of this distinguished group is to act upon its findings in a way that is beneficial to our children and our society. Let me quote from the Committee Report what I believe to be the most significant findings.

". . . the data, while not wholly consistent or conclusive, do indicate that a modest relationship exists between the viewing of violence and aggressive behavior. The correlational evidence from surveys is amenable to either of two interpretations: that the viewing of violence causes the aggressive behavior, or that both the viewing and the aggression are joint products of some other common source. Several findings of survey studies can be cited to sustain the hypothesis that viewing of violent television has a causal relation to aggressive behavior, though neither individually nor collectively are the findings conclusive. They could also be explained by operation of a 'third variable' related to pre-existing conditions.

"The experimental evidence does not suffer from the ambiguities that characterize the correlational data with regard to third variables, since children in the experiments are assigned in ways that attempt to control such variables. The experimental findings are weak in various other ways and not wholly consistent from one study to another. Nevertheless, they provide suggestive evidence in favor of the interpretation that viewing violence on television is conducive to an increase in aggressive behavior, although it must be emphasized that

the causal sequence is very likely applicable only to some children who are predisposed in this direction.

"Thus, there is a convergence of the fairly substantial experimental evidence for short-run causation of aggression among some children by viewing violence on the screen and the much less certain evidence from field studies that extensive violence viewing precedes some long-run manifestations of aggressive behavior. This convergence of the two types of evidence constitutes some preliminary indication of a causal relationship, but a good deal of research remains to be done before one can have confidence in these conclusions.

"Thus, the two sets of findings converge in three respects: a preliminary and tentative indication of a causal relation between viewing violence on television and aggressive behavior; an indication that any such causal relation operates only on some children (who are predisposed to be aggressive); and an indication that it operates only in some environmental contexts. Such tentative and limited conclusions are not very satisfying. They represent substantially more knowledge than we had two years ago, but they leave many questions unanswered."

Mr. Chairman, I believe that you, in requesting the formation of this Committee, and the Committee members have provided a valuable service to our society. I believe that this report represents a significant step forward. These conclusions are based on solid scientific data and not on the opinion of one or another scientist. I believe further that the research reported in these five volumes, the Scientific Advisory Committee's deliberations, and this Subcommittee's hearings will provide a stimulus to other social scientists to build on the solid foundation which has now been erected in this important field of communication.